

VZCZCXRO1505
OO RUEHAG RUEHDBU RUEHROV RUEHSR
DE RUEHKB #0123/01 0441133
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 131133Z FEB 09
FM AMEMBASSY BAKU
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 0760
INFO RUCNCIS/CIS COLLECTIVE IMMEDIATE
RUCNMEM/EU MEMBER STATES IMMEDIATE
RUEHAK/AMEMBASSY ANKARA IMMEDIATE 3242
RHMFISS/CDR USEUCOM VAHINGEN GE IMMEDIATE
RUEAIIA/CIA WASHINGTON DC IMMEDIATE
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC IMMEDIATE
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC IMMEDIATE

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 BAKU 000123

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 02/13/2019

TAGS: [AJ](#) [KDEM](#) [KPAO](#) [PREL](#)

SUBJECT: OBAMA CAMPAIGN MANAGER BAKU VISIT SPARK
SPECULATION AND DEBATE

Classified By: Ambassador Anne E. Derse for reasons 1.4 (b,d).

11. (C) Summary: A Feb. 8-10 visit to Azerbaijan by former Obama campaign manager David Plouffe sparked a flurry of speculation and protest that bounced between Baku and Washington. Azerbaijan's opposition press speculated that Plouffe's quick visit was a sign that the Obama Administration was reaching out to Azerbaijan informally, perhaps probing Baku as a possible destination for the President's promised visit to a Muslim capital. As the trip became public knowledge and U.S. media criticized Plouffe's collaboration with lobbyists hired by the Government of Azerbaijan, the Baku opposition media jumped on the story full force to highlight the Aliyev government's poor international reputation.

12. (C) President Obama's Campaign Manager, David Plouffe, traveled to Baku Feb. 8-10 on personal travel coordinated by the Washington Speakers Bureau, with which he signed up following the election. Embassy only became aware of the visit Feb. 5, when representatives of the Western University contacted the Embassy looking for an American flag to decorate their stage for the planned Feb. 9 event. Upon confirming the plans for Plouffe, The Embassy reached out to the visit organizers to ensure Embassy officials had an opportunity to brief Plouffe prior to his public appearances.

By Feb. 6, invitations for the university event went out, and the Azerbaijani press began to produce instant analysis. The Embassy simply noted that Plouffe was coming to Baku as a private citizen, not a representative of the U.S. Government.

Local reporting on Plouffe's visit was repeated by RFE/RL's English language website Feb. 6, which, in turn prompted attention from the Washington Post, which carried the news in its Feb. 9 edition.

13. (C) By the time Plouffe arrived in Baku and met with Ambassador Derse, PAO and POL-ECON Counselor the morning of Feb. 9, the media firestorm was fully raging. Embassy agreed that we would continue to note the private nature of Plouffe's visit while highlighting the very positive messages about how new communication technologies empowered young voters in the speech he was to deliver at Western University.

Plouffe was appreciative of Embassy support and counsel, and agreed that it would be valuable to get his key messages on democracy out to the widest audience possible.

14. (C) Local media protested the exclusion of reporters from the Western University speech, and that protest, combined with a Feb. 10 Wall Street Journal report, kept the story alive in Azerbaijan. Following remarks made at a USAID-sponsored conference at the Parliament Feb. 11, Ambassador Derse reassured the press that Plouffe's visit was simply that of a private citizen, with no hidden messages nor agendas. She also underscored the "very important message"

about citizen empowerment via new information technologies that Plouffe outlined in his speech. Her remarks were widely covered by Azerbaijani TV newscasts and by newspapers of all political stripes, including government and ruling New Azerbaijan Party-owned organs.

15. (C) To ensure that Azerbaijanis get the pro-democracy message, Embassy produced a transcript of his remarks, which have been distributed in both English and Azerbaijani. While repeating the private nature of the visit, Embassy has attempted to defuse the situation.

16. (C) Local and international media have speculated as to who orchestrated the visit and for what purpose. An NGO with government connections, the Association for Civil Society Development in Azerbaijan reportedly orchestrated the project in collaboration with U.S. lobby firm Bob Lawrence and Associates. The opposition press has largely focused on theories that the GOAJ must be trying to buy a direct connection to the White House via its lobbying efforts, but they have also explored the possibility that the Obama Administration wanted to open an unofficial channel for communication with Azerbaijan, including the possibility of selecting Baku as the destination for the President's promised trip to a Muslim capital. Comments from well-known political analyst Zardust Alizade in the Feb. 12 opposition daily Azadliq were typical: "I think he was not here just because of the lecture -- Washington is trying to clarify, check something through unofficial ways."

17. (C) On February 10, President Aliyev's senior legal

BAKU 00000123 002 OF 002

adviser Shahin Aliyev told the Embassy that the purpose of sponsoring the Plouffe visit was purely public relations. He admitted that its execution had been both costly and disastrous in terms of Azerbaijan's public image. He said that he intended to report to the President that this was yet another failure of the expensive U.S. lobbying firms hired by the Azerbaijani Government.

18. (C) Comment: Plouffe was contrite for having stepped into a more complicated geopolitical mess than he expected, but the message he brought to about democracy and citizen empowerment was an excellent one. The radioactive nature of Azerbaijan's international reputation on democracy and human rights was highlighted by this episode.

DERSE
DERSE